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Dynamic Assessment for Learning Potential : A Shift in the Focus and Practice of Evaluating Japanese Oral Proficiency

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Dynamic Assessment for Learning Potential: A Shift in the Focus and Practice of Evaluating Japanese Oral Proficiency

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要旨

第二言語習得の評価法では、何の目的で、どのように、いつ、何を評価するかが重要な要素になってくる。なぜかと言えば、評価によって学習者の学習達成度を調べるということはもちろんのこと、教える内容、教え方、教科書の選択に至るまで全体のコースデザインの上で留意すべき点を明らかにできるからである。第二言語学習者の日本語の口頭会話能力の評価方法では、口答試験やインタビューを用いて会話能力を評価するのが従来からあるやり方である。本稿はそれら評価時現下の会話能力を評価する方法ではなく、学習者の将来の学習可能性に注目するダイナミック・アセスメントを取り上げ、その理論的特徴を考察するとともに、実践するときの問題点を挙げるものである。

【キーワード】 dynamic assessment, the zone of proximal development, latent oral proficiency, mediated learning experience

1. Introduction: what is the purpose of assessment?

For promoting language development, it is clear that evaluating learners' performance constitutes a valuable part of any courses of second language acquisition (SLA). There are basically two types of evaluation to contrast; summative assessment and formative assessment. Summative assessment is "the evaluation of an individual's or group's performance at the end of a unit of study, a course, or a program often used for purposes of accountability, admission decisions, promotion, and selection" (Lantolf & Throne, 2006, p. 348). Formative assessment, on the other hand, occurs during a course of study and focuses on the degree of educational achievement prescribed in the curriculum. "It allows teachers to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses in relation to specific curricular objectives and thus guides them in organizing and structuring instructional material" (d'Anglejan, Harley, and Shapson, 1990, p. 107). The diagnosis helps teachers plan and manage their teaching in the course, providing feedbacks about what students can do already and what needs improvement.

In both summative and formative assessment, teachers have deployed a wide variety of

standardized testing strategies including language aptitude and proficiency tests. Conventional standardized testing relies on assessment of the products of presumed past learning opportunities. “Vocabulary tests, for example, are common, and these by their very nature reflect past learning” (Haywood & Lidz, 2007, p. 8). The focus of the assessment is placed on the “here-and-now” outcome of the testing.

There are various strategies in an assessment repertoire, including oral tests charted out with a “question and answer (Q&A)” formula and interviews set in real-life situations. With respect to the students’ “here-and-now” performance, the teachers/assessors tend to focus on the listing of “failures” that they make in the process of assessment. For example, when a student makes mistakes in answering questions on oral tests, his or her mistakes are evaluated on predetermined correct or incorrect bases. In addition, those responses in interviews which do not match the prescribed model answers are recorded and identified as “wrong” answers. It is fair to say that conventional assessment of students’ oral performance is grounded on the number or the nature of mistakes that they make during the assessment, not on the achievement that they attained. The fundamental testing paradigm is based on the negative side of students’ language development not on the positive side of what they have achieved.

There should be ways of assessing underlying capacities from which students can plot to attain future achievement in their language development. It seems difficult to evaluate students’ latent capacities if assessment focuses only on developed abilities manifested in the answers of testing or in the responses of the interviews. That is to say, one-shot testing does not provide enough information for evaluating students’ language development. It becomes important for language teachers to create paradigm shifts in the focuses and practices of language assessment to obtain information regarding students’ learning potential.

Dynamic assessment (DA) is a testing strategy that involves instructional interventions as mediation during the assessment, trying to elicit students’ latent capacities with which it would be possible for students to produce changes in their language development (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008). Ableeva (2008) remarks:

The goal of DA is to reveal learners’ potential future development on the intermental plane and to help it develop on the intramental plane through mediator-learner interaction. DA proponents argue that this kind of assessment-with-mediation brings assessment and instruction together into an organic unity whereby learning is the result of mediation, which is then internalized and becomes accessible to be deployed later in other contexts.
(p. 62)

DA is an approach to understanding students’ learning potential that is in the process of

maturing (i.e. dynamic). The focus of the procedures is on the process rather than on the products of learning.

On the other hand, non-dynamic (i.e., static) assessment (NDA) focuses on the matured abilities that students have already acquired. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) clarify the difference between DA and NDA, pointing out that NDA “emphasizes products formed as a result of preexisting skills” (p. 28), whereas DA provides a glimpse into students’ future potential.

The conceptual foundations of DA are drawn from Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which postulates that learning is a fundamentally social process (Daniels, 2008; del Rio & Alvarez, 2007; Johnson, 2004). A discussion of socio-genetic mental functioning helps to reveal the pedagogical orientations for the assessment of language proficiency (Ableeva, 2008; Poehner, 2008). In this paper, an attempt to use DA to assess oral proficiency in a Japanese as a second language class (JSL) will be discussed.

2. Comparison between DA and NDA

2.1 What is to be evaluated in DA?

To the extent that the dichotomy between teaching and assessment is established, the outcomes of assessment provide language teachers with important information on what and how to teach their students. That is to say, language assessment becomes an important part of the overall account of teaching curriculum and agenda. In comparing DA with other NDA procedures, Anton (2009) remarks that “it is not intended as a replacement for other types of testing but as a complement to them” (p. 578). There are crucial differences in assessment approaches between DA and NDA. Haywood and Lidz (2007) point out the questions to be considered in making the decision of what is to be evaluated in DA:

- a. What is the present level of performance, that is, baseline or without help?
- b. What are the recognizable barriers or obstacles to better learning and performance?
- c. How much and what kinds of intervention were required to produce improved performance?
- d. What is the response to intervention?
- e. How much investment, of what kinds, may be required to promote long-term gains in performance? (pp. 12-15)

Based on these questions, teachers/assessors determine how many and what kinds of hints and suggestions that students need in order to solve the problems.

Central to the approaches in DA is the idea that teaching and assessment are inseparable.

Teaching and assessment are dialectically integrated as a means to move beyond the “here-and-now” demands of each activity in the assessment. The unity of teaching and assessment emphasizes the emergent learning potential rather than the fixed previously acquired abilities.

2. 2 What is the role of the teacher/assessor in DA?

In NDA, teachers/assessors are expected to “adopt a neutral and disinterested stance as a means of minimizing measurement error” (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002, p. 29). On the other hand, in DA, teachers/assessors intervene in the middle of assessment. Lantolf and Poehner (2004) remark that “the examiner functions as a mediator who reacts to learner’s responsiveness and is more concerned with cognitive transformation than with performance efficiency” (p. 59). Mediation and assessment are fused into a single activity in DA. Because of the teacher/assessor’s intervention during assessment, the issue of reliability or validity of assessment instruments seems to be irrelevant in the discussion of the organic unity of teaching and assessment.

To find the best way to remedy a student who seems to have problems during the assessment, the teacher/assessor intervenes in the process “by arousing him or her to a higher level of curiosity and to a level at which structural cognitive changes can occur” (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002, p. 54). Students are ushered to re-orient themselves to face their problems and alter their approaches to problem solving. Taking into account the results of the intervention, the teacher/assessor seeks for what would be possible for the student under more optimal conditions. The primary goal of DA is to suggest interventions aimed at the enhancement and realization of the students’ latent capacities to learn (Kozulin & Gindis, 2007). The nature of the relationship between teachers/assessors and students, therefore, changes from neutral-unaided to collaborative-assisting in favor of a commitment to joint problem solving (Lidz & Gindis, 2003).

2. 3 What are limitations in DA procedures?

It is clear that intervention is embedded within the assessment procedure in DA, so that teachers/assessors need to be prepared to provide students with appropriate types of mediation and to know when to withdraw this mediation as the students begin to self-correct. Unlike in NDA where teaching and assessment is separated, teachers/assessors intervene in students’ performance by providing them with hints, prompts and suggestions, ranging from implicit to explicit, during the process of DA. Lantolf and Throne (2006) point out that “in DA, a

specific form of feedback is provided – mediated assistance – and this is the crux of the assessment process” (p. 331).

The amount of mediated assistance, however, varies significantly according to how quickly a student is able to use the mediation to reach the appropriate answer. In other words, the mediated assistance is individualized according to each student’s responsiveness to the intervention. It is important for teachers/assessors to provide only the help that was actually needed, trying to fine-tune to students’ needs, so that “help given” and “help needed” can be assumed to be the same (Komura, 2009). Haywood and Lidz (2007) remark:

This has to be a major source of unreliability in DA because different examiners respond to different personal characteristics (their own) in inferring examinees’ need for intervention. Much of the validity of the conclusions reached on the basis of DA depends on the training of examiners to limit their intervention to what is actually needed for examinees to incorporate the cognitive and metacognitive principles necessary for them to achieve improved performance. (pp. 13-14)

The outcome of DA for one student is not generalized for other students. The context and quality of the interaction between the teacher/assessor and students vary significantly in each situation (Anton, 2009).

3. The Theoretical Framework for DA

The paradigm shifts seen in DA for oral proficiency are grounded on Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (SCT). One of the basic tenets of the theory relies on the assumption that human mental functioning emerges in social interaction with others (Daniels, 2008; del Rio & Alvarez, 2007; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Johnson, 2004; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Nassaji & Swain, 2000). Based on this socio-genetic notion of mental functioning, Vygotsky (1978) postulated that human action and thinking are mediated by socioculturally constructed tools and signs. Trying to articulate the relationship between mental functioning and sociocultural context, Vygotsky emphasized language (a sign system) as the primary tool for mediating human action and thinking. In this Vygotskian socio-genetic perspective, language used in mediated action is considered a vehicle to generate socially conformed individual consciousness.

With this socio-genetic orientation, sociocultural studies of the human mind are integrated into SLA (Donato, 2000; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Haywood & Lidz, 2007; Lantolf, 2000). Vygotskian psycholinguistic theory holds that:

Every function in the learner’s cultural development appears twice, on two levels. Some

first, on the social, and later, on the psychological levels. First, between people as an interpsychological category, and then inside as an intrapsychological category. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

Citing this connection, SLA researchers started investigating the process of language acquisition focusing on the course of language socialization that happened in a particular sociocultural setting (Anton, 1999; Donato, 2000; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ohta, 2001; Storch, 2002; Swain, 2000). They tried to demonstrate how individuals acquire a second language (L2) in the Vygotskian scheme of transformation from interpsychological (between individuals) to intrapsychological (inside individuals) planes. That is to say, L2 acquisition occurs in the internalization process in which interpsychological function occurs first and intrapsychological function follows (Kozulin, 2003; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Central to this account of internalization from inter- to intra- psychological function, there are studies investigating the role of interactions in dyads and small group work in Japanese as a second language classes (JSL) (Ohta, 2001; Mori, 2002). In association with the relationship between interactional competence in language use and the social interaction in which it occurs, it seems feasible then to integrate the socio-genetic orientation into the analysis of L2 development.

One of the most commonly adopted Vygotskian sociocultural constructs in language education is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Poehner, 2008). Kinginger (2002) points out that “the ZPD construct is a shorthand device capturing the emergence of cognitive development within social interaction, when participants are provided assistance from more-competent others (teachers or peers) as they engage in learning activity” (p. 240). Focusing upon the role of social interaction in JSL classes, the concept of the ZPD provides an important insight into the focuses and practices of language assessment. Interaction between teachers/assessors and students in dynamic assessment creates their ZPD where the students’ learning potential emerges. In other words, to assess a student’s learning potential means to create his or her ZPD through the interaction with the teacher/assessor. Lidz and Peña (2009) claim that “DA is an approach to individual assessment that has been described as creation of a ZPD” (p. 122).

The main assumption here is that a student’s potential language proficiency in the future emerges in the process of internalization in his or her ZPD. The internalization process of manifesting his or her potential proficiency involves a transformation shift from interpsychological to intrapsychological planes within social interaction in the ZPD, where

the expert (teacher/assessor) and novice (student) conjointly engage in speech communication.

Nassaji and Swain (2000) point out that “learning emerges as the result of interaction, but interaction within the ZPD” (p. 35). Based on his empirical studies of child’s cognitive development, Vygotsky (1978) stated, in an attempt to illustrate the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, that :

the zone of proximal development...is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

In this definition, it seems appropriate to claim that under guidance from their teacher in JSL classes, students’ latent oral proficiency is realized on the level of potential development through the social interaction in the ZPD, where it is claimed that their “mediated learning experience” (Lidz, 1991, cited in Anton, 2009, p. 579) occurs.

4. DA application for Japanese oral proficiency

To bring my argument to the fore, a protocol where didactic discourses between a teacher/assessor and his student in JSL will be discussed. In a pedagogically constructed situation in which they look for their favorite (most suitable) host families, students negotiate with the teacher/assessor (playing the role of their host family coordinator) as a DA mediator facilitating the best result of the interview. In this interview, as a part of the final exam, the students were encouraged to communicate their requests and living needs with their host families. The following were specified for DA evaluation categories: (1) variety of expressions; (2) accuracy of structures; (3) fluency and pronunciation and (4) communication and listening skills, the students were not informed about DA for their oral proficiency in the interview. Useful sentence structures and expressions for the negotiation are given to the students prior to the interview, ranging from “giving-and-receiving” constructions to relative pronouns, among other grammatical items that were covered in the JSL class. The discourse in the negotiation included some basic expressions such as “How long does it take from home to school?” “How many brothers and sisters are there in the family?” and “Do I have to cook or clean for myself?”

In the following excerpt, a female student M from Columbia, enrolled in the second semester, is struggling with the morphological formation of an appropriate verb used in its giving-and-receiving construction. During the conjoint activity of looking for the best host

family, a recorded interview between the teacher/assessor and the student unfolds like this:

- (1) Teacher/Assessor (T) : *Eetto, donna hosutofamirii ga ii desu ka.*
(What kind of host family do you think is good?)
- (2) M : *Ee...mm...kodomo no...kodomo ga...inai kute..ee chiisai
hosutofamirii o sumi
tai desu.*
(Well...there are no children...and a small host family...I want to live.)
- (3) T : *A, soo desu ka.* (Is that so?)
- (4) M : *Ee.* (Yes)
- (5) T : *Kodomo ga inai...?* (There are no children...?)
- (6) M : *Ee.. ahh...hai. Mata, eego o hanashita shi...ee...Kyooto
o...to...Oosaka o
suru...annai...suru...?*
(Well...yes. Also, spoke English and Kyoto and Osaka, do, show around?.)
- (7) T : *Kyooto ya Oosaka o annai...?* (Kyoto and Osaka, show around.)
- (8) M : *Annai...?* (Show around...?)
- (9) T : *Annai...?* (Show around...?)
- (10) M : *Annai...shi...?* (Show around...?)
- (11) T : *Shite.* (“...shite”)
- (12) M : *Annai shite moraimashita...moraitai desu.*
(Had [them] show [me] around...want them to show me around.)
- (13) T : *A, soo desu ka.* (Is that so?)

In line (6), M seems to have had a problem in continuing her utterance because she did not know how to construct the “giving-and-receiving” sentence. It is obvious from the expectation in the chain of utterance development that M wanted to say that she wanted her host family to show her around Kyoto and Osaka. However, she did not succeed in the sentence construction.

The teacher/assessor tried to intervene in the conversation responding to her difficulty in the sentence construction. From the lines (7) to (11), the teacher/assessor here tried to elicit M’s latent capacity which might have become emergent in her ZPD in their social interaction, by offering her with prompts implicitly and explicitly, “*Annai...?* (to show around...?)”. The mediated assistance is one of the most important characteristics in the procedures of DA, which can be contrasted with NDA where assessors closely monitor and record students’ deficiencies in their oral performance. In NDA procedure, there is no further interaction after

the point of failure in the assessment process, focusing only on students' acquired ability from the previous learning.

In DA, on the other hand, the teacher/assessor “prompts students during an oral interview in order to give them the opportunity to revise their performance in appropriate ways” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 339). As a facilitator for better performance in the conjoint activity, the teacher/assessor serves to identify the learners' ZPD in the “mediated learning experience” (Lidz, 1991, cited in Anton, 2009, p. 579). It is clear that M benefitted from the mediated assistance and was able to continue her utterance, succeeding in the sentence construction, “*annai shite* morai daidesu ([She] wants them to show her around).”

In the next excerpt, M continued struggling for the appropriate verb form of the “giving-and-receiving construction”:

- (14) T : *Demo, eetto...Hayashi-san no okaasan?* (But, uh..., the host mother of Hayashi?)
- (15) M : *Hai.* (Yes?)
- (16) T : *Ryoori ga dekimasen.* (She cannot cook.)
- (17) M : *Oh, ahh...soo desu ka.* (Oh, is that right?)
- (18) T : *Ryoori ga kirai desu.* (She hates cooking.)
- (19) M : (Laughter)
- (20) T : *Ahh...sorekara...sooji?* (Well, then, cleaning?)
- (21) M : *Hai.* (Yes?)
- (22) T : *Sooji mo kirai desu.* (She also does not like cleaning.)
- (23) M : (Laughter) *Demo, watashi wa...ee...ee...ryoori o suru...no ga suki desu kara, ee...Koronbia no...ee..., tabemono o...ee...ee...tabemono o ryoori...ee...shi...ryoori shitai...shitai..., to omoimasu.*
(But, since I...eh...like cooking, Columbian food...food...to cook...want to...that I think.)
- (24) T : *Ryoori...?* (cook?)
- (25) M : *Ryoori...ryoori shite mo...?* (Cook...to cook...?)
- (26) T : *Ryoori shite...?* (To cook...?)
- (27) M : *Ryoori shite age masu. Ryoori shite age tai desu.*
(I cook [for them]. I want to cook [for them].)
- (28) T : *A, soo desu ka. Soo desu ka. Ii desu ne.*
(Is that so? That is good.)

In line (23), it is clear that M struggled to create a sentence that can convey “She wants to cook

for them (lit., she wants to give them her service of cooking).” To find the best way to remedy her, then, the teacher/assessor intervenes in the conversation by providing her with mediated assistance, instead of recording her language deficiency as failure in the assessment. From the previous experience of mediated assistance of “*annai...shite* (to show around),” she quickly responded to the mediated assistance by reminding herself of the “*annai...shite*”. She succeeded in revising her sentence into “*ryoori shite agemasu* ([I] cook for them).” The appropriate verb form of “*ryoori shite*” was easily elicited this time in the process of assessment.

It seems fair then to claim that the teacher/assessor succeeded in eliciting M’s latent capacity for constructing “giving-and-receiving” sentences, which might have remained unnoticeable in the process of language assessment if the mediated assistance of DA was not provided. Lantolf and Poehner (2008) remark that “the goal of DA is to reveal learners’ potential future development on the intermental plane and to help it develop on the intramental plane through mediator-learner interaction” (p. 62). This goal seems to be achieved in this attempt of DA for Japanese oral proficiency.

5. Conclusion

It is important to claim that DA was born of widespread dissatisfaction with conventional (product-oriented, static) means of testing (Lidz & Gindis, 2003). DA puts more emphasis on the process, while NDA emphasizes the product. The primary goal of NDA is to monitor and record the points of failure in the products, whereas the goal in DA is to lead students to a point of achievement, emphasizing a paradigm shift from measurement to cooperation.

For cooperation in DA, it is indispensable for teachers/assessors to prioritize the unification of teaching and assessment in process. DA is a “procedure that integrates assessment and instruction into seamless, united activity aimed at promoting learners’ development through appropriate forms of mediation sensitive to individual’s current abilities” (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, cited in Birjandi, 2009, p. 188).

However, there is a limitation in administering DA. To create a mediated learning experience for learners, it becomes necessary for teachers/assessors to estimate and provide the amount of help that the learners might need in order to reach their future potential achievement. Lantolf and Poehner (2008) point out that teachers/assessors “must attune mediation to learners’ changing needs and this requires sensitivity to learners’ reciprocating acts during DA” (p. 36). The mediated assistance is then tailored to the individual needs of the learners. In an example of Japanese oral proficiency in JSL, a student M succeeded in moving

herself onto her higher level of oral proficiency as a result of internalizing the mediated assistance offered during the interaction with her teacher/assessor. However, the outcome of the assessment cannot be generalized for other cases of students, because the context and quality of the interaction was individualized during the assessment itself. In short, the mediated learning experience varies according to each learner's responsiveness to the intervention.

Individualized procedures create a major source of unreliability in DA because different teachers/assessors respond to different personal characteristics in estimating their students' need for intervention. The validity of the assessment outcomes depends on the training of teachers/assessors to decide when to provide and when to withdraw their mediated assistance during the process. Therefore, it is important for teachers/assessor to outline their methods prior to DA with their own predetermined assessment criteria, with which they decide to provide appropriate types of mediation. Despite the lack of reliability and validity in DA procedures, it becomes necessary for teachers/assessors to choose to adopt DA over NDA, if they are in favor of claiming that learning power cannot be properly evaluated in isolation from mediated assistance in the assessment for the purpose of eliciting students' learning potential. From this perspective, the discussion of DA, characterized with its organic unification of teaching and assessment, provides an important insight into the development of language proficiency.

Note

- (1) The framework of the dyadic interview was created by a teacher who taught the level-2 students of spoken Japanese at Kansai Gaidai University in 2010.

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